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ABSTRACT

In this research study, individuals involved in the original implementation of a desegregation plan in the Riverside Unified School District (California) and those who were affected by the plan were interviewed to determine pros and cons of the desegregation issue. In Riverside 30 years earlier there were three segregated schools, one that was primarily Hispanic and two that were labeled "Negro." Under considerable local pressure, school officials designed a desegregation plan and implemented it within seven weeks in the summer of 1965. Desegregation in Riverside was implemented prior to legal requirements, but it was accomplished only after parents threatened to boycott and a segregated school was burned. What appeared to be a solution accepted by the community may have been misrepresented as having been agreed on by all area inhabitants. Adults who were elementary school students during desegregation, parents of former students, administrators, and teachers were interviewed for this study. Although the majority of those interviewed agreed that the experience was painful, they agreed that it was an important decision to insure equal opportunity for all children and for future generations. Most parents remembered that they were invited to provide input into desegregation plans, but it seemed that participation had followed socioeconomic lines. Parents did remember that they were invited to participate at the local school level, but that they often found it difficult to participate in the new schools because of transportation problems or other constraints. Students, parents, and school personnel remembered the experience as painful but definitely necessary. They also thought that the opportunities of desegregation more than compensated for the inconvenience, and that it was worth the sacrifice. Most thought that the plan had been successful, and that it was successful because of the ideals of the leaders, parents, and students. (Contains one reference.) (SLD)

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THE VOICES OF DESEGREGATION:

PARENTS, STUDENTS AND DISTRICT PERSONNEL REFLECT,

THIRTY YEARS AFTER

by

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The Voices of Desegregation: Parents, Students and District Personnel Reflect Thirty Years After

Introduction

Current debate continues over the virtue of communities claiming ownership of neighborhood schools which may result in the future resegregation of school districts. Recent debates also focus on ballot initiatives which call for the rescinding of affirmative action practices which have made attempts to help disadvantaged students gain access to higher education. Legal issues, too, have been raised in various states concerning what financial responsibilities school districts have with previous desegregation decisions, the possible result being the rescinding of previous decisions which favored desegregation (i.e.: Missouri v. Jenkins).

Although some may argue that the needs for desegregation have been met, it appears that those individuals and groups who are promoting these efforts to resegregate may be overlooking the problems that existed when segregation was the norm. While few would argue that neighborhood schools have benefits for students and their families, arguably fewer benefits may exist in underprivileged neighborhoods. This research study interviewed individuals involved in the original implementation of a desegregation plan (district personnel) and those who were affected by the decision that was made (parents and students), who were living in segregated neighborhoods in the 1960's, and who were desegregated to other schools out of their neighborhoods. It asked individuals to discuss the pros and cons of the segregation/desegregation issue.

Background

The Riverside Unified School District, located approximately 50 miles east of Los Angeles, entered the 1960's in much the same way as other school districts in the United States. That is, neighborhood schools reflected the communities that surrounded them

with the natural result being that, due to the segregation of minorities into specific areas of the city, elementary schools within those communities were segregated as well. Also, as with other cities, although Brown v. Board of Education had been in effect since 1954, Riverside had not, nor had other districts, addressed the issue of lessening the inherent inequality of their three segregated schools. As in other communities across the nation, segregated Riverside schools with gerrymandered borders existed in segregated neighborhoods. And, as was the case elsewhere, allowances insured that some children, mainly White, who lived in minority neighborhoods, would have the opportunity to be transferred to schools attended by "their own kind."

In Riverside, the three segregated schools consisted of one which was primarily Hispanic and two which were labeled "Negro." Although parents in the minority schools were given the opportunity for their children to change schools, through a policy which permitted minority pupils to apply for intra-district transfers, few applied for these transfers, and those who did claimed to be discouraged by the process. Although the district believed that efforts were being made to increase educational equality through the institution of a "compensatory education" program, this too was seen as an inadequate solution to problems brought about by long standing deprivation.

In September of 1965, in a attempt to speed the process of desegregation, a petition signed by 396 Black parents of school-aged children and residents of the segregated community demanded the closing of the two "all-Negro" schools with the threat of opening their own "freedom school" if the demand was not fulfilled. Within days of the meeting, one of the schools (the school in the more affluent Black community) was greatly damaged by an arson-caused fire. Coupled with the recent problems experienced in the nearby Watts community of Los Angeles in the summer of 1965, school personnel hastened to develop a plan for integration and were able to implement it in seven short weeks, eventually closing the three segregated schools and reassigning students to other schools in the district.

Purpose and Research Questions

The objective of this study was to examine the views of those individuals who made the decisions and those who were most affected by the implementation of the plan, to discover what effects desegregation had on their lives both during and after the process. To understand the process of desegregation and the experiences of those involved, answers to the following questions were sought:

1. How were decisions made during the desegregation process? Were parents and children involved in the desegregation decision-making?

2. Were parents and students invited to be involved in the new school to which they were assigned? If so, how were they invited? If not, why not?

3. What were their recollections of the experience? Was the desegregation experience a pleasant or an unpleasant one?

4. Did the experience impact the students' successes in school or their later successes?

5. Whether or not the parents were involved in the education of their children, did that involvement increase or decrease with desegregation?

6. If given the opportunity to live through this period again, would those interviewed choose to send the children to schools out of the neighborhood or would they fight for a different plan?

Methodology

Data Collection

An historical analysis gives a descriptive view of an incident while qualitative research allows the researcher to understand social phenomenon. The incorporation of qualitative research methods with historical research was used to provide the study with both perspective and personal experience. While qualitative research allowed for the

"voice" of the people who were being studied to be heard, the study's historical aspect allowed that voice to be heard in proper perspective.

To understand the era, the process, and the people involved, prior to interviewing participants, two types of data were collected and analyzed: (1) archival documents in the forms of newspaper accounts, school documents, board minutes and personal correspondence, and (2) previously documented information in the forms of university studies, dissertations, taped interviews and surveys collected over the past thirty years.

Site Selection

The Riverside Unified School District in Riverside, California, was selected not only because it had experienced desegregation similar to that which many school districts experienced in the 1960's, but also, because of its unique method of solving the problem, the short time required to implement a plan (seven weeks) and because it had been labeled a success. The area contained a wealth of studies and data still in existence and the people living in the area were, as yet, willing to talk about it. Although the implementation of the district desegregation plan, prior to legal requirement, brought notoriety to the district in the form of awards and accolades from educational organizations and the NAACP, what at first appeared to be a smooth bridging to the community which had been segregated for decades was, in actuality, very complex. Desegregation in Riverside may have been implemented prior to legal requirements, but it was accomplished only after parents threatened to boycott and a segregated school was burned. Therefore, what appeared to be a situation that may have been accepted as satisfactory by the community, may have been misrepresented as having been agreed upon by all of the inhabitants.

Participants

In order to answer the questions, a sample of adults who were elementary children during the period of the implementation of the plan and who attended one of the three

segregated schools, and minority parents of children who attended these schools were interviewed for the study. Participants in the study also included the former district superintendent, board members, school principals, teachers, community aides, and classified staff employed by the district and in those positions during the implementation of the plan. Members of the community interviewed included former (and present) members of the Urban League, Settlement House, NAACP and other active community organizations. Individuals whose names appeared in school documents, board minutes, newspaper articles and histories of the area and time were also included in the interview process.

Interviewing began with active community members and the newspaper reporter who covered the story in 1965, who gave not only their interpretations of the topic but who were able to identify the current location of parents and former students. Upon culmination of parent and student interviews, school personnel and school board members were given an opportunity to reflect on their interpretations of the process.

When dealing with sensitive issues, the historian's hope is that memories remain accurate over the years that have ensued since the incident. A possible limitation of this study is that memories may have changed or may have been distorted by being perceived within a modern context. A more likely limitation was the author's inability to locate individuals whose interviews and opinions differed from those received and who would have added important elements to the analysis of the subject.

Data Analysis

The data collected for this research relates the stories of those individuals who were a part of the process of desegregation thirty years ago. In the collection of data for this study, interviewees (district personnel, parents and students) all gave in depth accounts of their experiences through taped interviews which were then transcribed, coded and analyzed.

Findings

Although the majority of the interviewees responded that the experience was painful, they agreed that it was an important decision to insure equal opportunity for all children and for future generations. Those surveyed also provided suggestions on how the process could have been accomplished less painfully. In answer to the interview questions, the following responses were compiled.

1. How were decisions made during the desegregation process? Were parents involved in the desegregation decision-making process? The answer to the question of parent involvement depends on whether the parent was a vocal member of the community or not, and in which school attendance area he or she resided at the time. Most parents recalled that the community was invited by the district to air their feelings and to provide input into the discussion through "lots of meetings" that took place in September of 1965, prior to the implementation of the desegregation plan. In order to obtain the support of the community, opinions were not only actively sought by the district, but minority leaders were invited and encouraged to become team members in the process. Although parents were not asked to be a part of the actual writing of the plan (because, as one administrator responded, too many people would have made it too difficult to arrive at a timely solution, and due to the volatility of the era, time was at a minimum to arrive at a solution), their input was sought in making the decision and they were recruited into the process of its implementation. Participation varied by school and tended to follow socio-economic lines (i.e.: those minority parents who were more affluent, tended to be more involved in the process than those who were not).

2. Were parents invited to be involved in the new school to which their children were assigned? If so, how were they invited? If not, why not? Parents and school personnel responded that parents were definitely invited to be involved in the new schools to which their children were assigned, invited by the same methods that are used today to

notify parents of activities at their children's schools. That is, notices were sent home.

Parents interviewed, however, also responded that although they would have preferred to be involved at the new schools, often they were unable to find a way to get to the school to participate in activities either due to lack of transportation or because their children were attending too many different schools. Transportation had not been a problem in the neighborhood school because it was within walking distance from their homes. Families also responded that if they had more than one elementary aged child, their children were often sent to different schools. (One White parent who lived within the segregated borders had four children in four different schools!) The main problem was, they voiced, not that the invitation had not been made inviting them to the new school, but that, upon arrival, they often found not only a lack of welcome but in some cases open hostility toward them and their children. Most, including the White parents from the minority school, replied that they felt "alien" when they tried to get involved. The situation was compounded in the Hispanic families who often found a language and cultural barrier at the new school.

3. What were their recollections of the experience? Was the desegregation experience pleasant or unpleasant? Those interviewed recalled a wealth of information on the desegregation experience and responded with recollections that were positive and negative. For many, the recollections of the experience are vivid and belie the years that have passed. Through emotion and occasionally tears, students, parents, and school personnel responded that the experience, though necessary, was definitely unpleasant and that the children of the 1960's bore the burden for today's society.

4. Did the experience impact the students' school success or future successes? Individuals interviewed responded that, although the situation was difficult, the opportunities of desegregation overcompensated for the inconvenience, adding that it was therefore worth the sacrifice. Many responded that parental support from the sidelines

encouraged students to do well. They also agreed that the opportunity to experience desegregated schools enhanced the minority students' opportunities for later successes.

5. Whether or not the parents were involved in the education of their children, did that involvement increase or decrease during desegregation? For the most part, because of the aforementioned reasons (transportation and hostility), parent involvement at the new school site decreased, but home involvement did not. Many minority parents encouraged their children, reminding them that a new opportunity was open for them to succeed. Opportunities that they, the parents, had not experienced.

6. If given the opportunity to live through this period again would those interviewed choose to send the children to the schools out of the neighborhood or would they fight for a different plan? Although desegregation was important for later successes, most people agreed that today they would fight for a different plan. Rather than closing the neighborhood schools, respondents replied that today they would demand that the segregated schools stay open in their neighborhoods and that the district require the "two-way" busing of White children into their schools. Parents, students, and former school staff and administrators liked their schools and would have preferred to stay in them. They believed that the addition of White students bused into their minority schools would have increased academic performance and accomplished integration. In response to this answer, former district personnel who were interviewed disagreed. They believed that, given the climate of the community and the time (the 1960's), the White community would not have accepted the two-way busing of their children into the poorer, minority neighborhoods. This, they added, would have defeated the implementation of a desegregation plan.

In general, respondents agreed that the plan was successful and that it was successful because of district leadership, and the community who, along with the district, worked together for the benefit of children. Interviewees agreed that the Riverside Unified School District was successful at desegregating because of an ideal, or "vision" of

those involved, the individuals who were in district leadership positions, their staffs, the community, the parents and the students, who "wanted to work together to do what was right."

Discussion

In order to make educated decisions which will affect future generations of students, it is important for school administrators to look to the past. Because current debate exists over the virtue of communities claiming ownership of neighborhood schools, which may result in the future resegregation of school districts, it is important to hear the voices of those who were a part of the original process. This study examined the successes and failures of desegregation through the eyes of those who were most heavily influenced by it, the students, their families, and district personnel, required to participate in the process during its inception. In so doing it will inform the practice of school administrative personnel today.

For further information see:

Studer, S. R. (1997). Parent/School Relations in Crisis: Revisiting Desegregation in Riverside, California. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Riverside. Available through UMI dissertation abstracts.